FACTSHEET

International Services

United States Department of Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

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International Services: Global Perspectives in American Agriculture

Protecting agriculture today is a challenge that reaches beyond political and geophysical boundaries around the globe. Transporting plants, animals, and their agricultural byproducts in international commerce helps meet the worldwide demand for food but also increases the risks of introducing pests and diseases into new areas of the world.

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) protects and promotes U.S. agriculture through an international unit that cooperates with agricultural representatives in foreign countries.

International Services (IS) is the APHIS arm that works outside of the United States to keep agricultural pests and diseases from entering the country, to facilitate agricultural exports, and to bring agricultural trade into harmony with agricultural health worldwide. More and more, IS is assuming an active role in defining international agricultural health, thus facilitating fair and safe global trade.

IS employees overseas have the following responsibilities:

- Facilitate U.S. agricultural exports;
- Provide preclearance of foreign commodities bound for the United States;
- Exchange technical information with counterparts;
- Provide technical assistance to other countries;
- Strengthen agricultural health organizations; and
- Cooperate in international agricultural surveillance and control programs.

Facilitating U.S. Agricultural Exports

Protecting export markets for agricultural products is vital to the U.S. economy. IS employees play a major role in ensuring that the United States' agricultural exports are accessible to foreign countries. IS employees discuss foreign technical requirements with agricultural officials in other countries and explain U.S. agricultural health policies to them. Through these exchanges, IS reduces or eliminates quarantine barriers for U.S. agricultural products and explains the technical basis for IS' own strict requirements.

If a U.S. agricultural commodity arrives in a foreign country with missing or incomplete documentation, IS employees based in the country can provide verification of export certificates. Working directly with foreign officials, IS is often able to obtain immediate release of a shipment that is held up and ensure that U.S. agricultural exports quickly reach their intended destination.

Providing Preclearance of Foreign Commodities

Preclearance means inspection and treatment of items onsite in foreign countries to prevent harmful exotic pests and diseases from getting into the United States. APHIS conducts preclearance activities in three major areas—commodity, military, and passenger.

IS offices overseas and at headquarters work with countries that want to establish preclearance programs if the country involved is willing to meet APHIS' requirements. Once a preclearance program is approved by APHIS, IS incountry employees will assist that country's federal plant protection service to prepare work plans with local industry representatives. The work plans specify what procedures the industry must take to ensure that the commodity for export will not carry pests and diseases and will meet U.S. quarantine entry requirements before departure.

IS coordinates all preclearance programs at headquarters outside Washington, DC, and details inspectors to foreign countries from APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program. These temporary duty officers preclear commodities in foreign countries for several months during some growing seasons.

IS also cooperates with the U.S. Department of Defense in preclearing military personnel, baggage, and equipment used overseas before they return to the United States. Redeployment of Desert Storm material from the Persian Gulf in 1991 was the largest military preclearance program in APHIS history. Twelve APHIS employees trained and advised military customs inspectors on cleaning mud and desert sand from 100,000 vehicles and other equipment. IS has a permanent employee assigned as the agricultural adviser to the military's European Command who oversees the preclearance program in Europe.

A great advantage of preclearance programs is that the hosts for harmful pests and diseases remain in the foreign country. Preclearance programs also decrease the number of APHIS port-of-entry personnel needed in the United States and reduce activities at congested U.S. ports.

Exchanging Technical Information

Through direct overseas contacts, IS employees gather and exchange information on plant and animal health. Through contacts with counterparts, APHIS people overseas are able to obtain information about outbreaks, new survey techniques, and control methods. By the same token, APHIS provides similar pest and disease data. Information APHIS obtains overseas enhances exclusion and detection at home. Information APHIS provides to quarantine officials overseas facilitates U.S. agricultural exports.

IS offers training seminars on epidemiology and surveillance to those countries interested in improving agricultural health. A popular seminar is Epi-Info, a computer program developed by the U.S. Public Health Service's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and adapted by IS to animal health. These countries use the program to determine what diseases are in a given area, how to survey and monitor for them, and through the epi-map, how to collect data on the diseases. This kind of technical information benefits the entire global community by providing standards for sound agricultural surveillance systems.

Providing Technical Assistance

Because APHIS is recognized internationally for its animal and plant health expertise, international organizations ask IS to help solve pest and disease problems.

With the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) formulating international standards in the areas of animal and plant health, international organizations are increasing their requests to IS for assistance in the development of phytosanitary and zoosanitary (plant and animal health) standards. IS employees are providing training, assisting in planning, and, in some instances, planning programs that support the growth and development of animal and plant health organizations and systems abroad. Establishment of scientifically sound standards for quarantine requirements encourages countries to avoid unscientific trade barriers and provides GATT with the basis for resolving trade disputes on animal and plant quarantine issues.

Strengthening International and Regional Organizations

IS represents the U.S. Government in dealing with many international and regional organizations concerned with animal and plant health. The IS Deputy Administrator, for example, is a member of the U.S. delegation to the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) and is the U.S. coordinator for the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex).

The OIE, with over 130 member countries, sets international zoosanitary codes and is recognized by GATT as the authority for animal health issues. The Codex is the international organization responsible for food safety and public health.

IS also has both informal and formal agreements with U.S. neighbors Canada and Mexico for dealing with agricultural threats to North America. Through the North American Plant Protection Organization (NAPPO), the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and informal bilateral meetings, the three countries have established dialogue for mutual assistance, support, and protection of continental agriculture.

As a member of NAPPO, APHIS exerts a direct impact on formulating both regional and international phytosanitary (plant health) standards under NAFTA. Plant quarantine principles, pest risk analysis, and the use of uniform procedures are high priorities for NAPPO.

Cooperating in International Surveillance and Control Programs

Pests and disease invasions decrease the quantity and quality of crop and livestock production and increase the costs of agricultural products for both the producer and consumer. In most cases, U.S. industry has learned that it is more costly to live with a pest or disease than to eradicate it.

In the case of screwworm, for example, U.S. livestock producers estimate that they save about $400 million per year because screwworm was eradicated from the country in the late 1960's.

APHIS and California together spent more than $68 million during 1990–92 to eradicate 3 different infestations of Mediterranean fruit fly, a foreign insect pest that attacks more than 250 fruits and vegetables. Although these eradication efforts were costly, they helped protect California's $18 billion-a-year agricultural industry from a destructive insect. APHIS economists have determined that Medfly could cost consumers an additional $821 million a year to pay for the costs of controlling this insect if it became established here.

The successful exclusion of exotic pests and diseases from the United States depends strongly on the cooperation of counterpart agencies in other countries.

By sharing U.S. expertise in pest and disease identification, surveillance, quarantine, control, and eradication techniques, IS strengthens the animal and plant health programs and infrastructures of foreign countries. IS works to ensure that countries which are in the process of developing technical and administrative personnel and systems will have the capability to establish strong animal and plant health programs.

IS employees overseas are a small but highly respected group. In their cooperation with foreign agricultural counterparts, IS employees are forging scientific plant and animal health relationships. In the future, these will become the basis for safe international agricultural trade for the benefit of the world community.